



Western History Association

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Source: *Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Autumn 2010), pp. 327-351

Published by: Western Historical Quarterly, Utah State University on behalf of Western History Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/westhistquar.41.3.0327>

Accessed: 30-01-2016 20:05 UTC

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JEFFERSONIAN JEWS: THE JEWISH AGRARIAN DIASPORA AND THE ASSIMILATIVE POWER OF THE WESTERN LAND, 1882–1930

TAYLOR SPENCE

Jewish philanthropies and Jewish agrarians in the late nineteenth century both saw the western land as the salvation for Diasporic Judaism, but for different reasons. These differences highlight the sometimes surprising outcomes of Americanization efforts on immigrant populations that enrich historians' understandings of the acculturation process. The American land helped some Jews preserve their culture even though they appeared to assimilate.

THOMAS JEFFERSON WROTE, “THOSE who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth.”¹ Was he talking about the “chosen people,” the children of Abraham? The chronicles of the Jews found in the Bible are replete with images of Jews in nature; they communicate with Yahweh by means of shrubs, fire, and mist and wander through a wilderness into a landed inheritance in Israel, where they become cultivators and husbandmen. Yet by the time Jefferson wrote this passage, the cornerstone of his vision of a republic of individual farmer-producers, he probably did not envision Jews tilling the earth. In fact, most popular accounts, including those by historians, have overwhelmingly depicted Jews as urban and engaged in some sort of commerce in the role of middlemen.² Historians of the West have included Jews invariably as spreaders of

TAYLOR SPENCE, PhD candidate, Yale University, thanks Kathryn Gin, Professors Barbara Welter (CUNY) and John Mack Faragher (Yale), and George Miles, curator, Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Library, for invaluable help in creating this article.

¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Baltimore, 1800), Q.XIX, 1782, ME 2:229.

² Roger Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door: American Immigration Policy and Immigrants*

capitalism. Hubert Howe Bancroft, describing the role Jews played in the westward spread of commerce, declared that the “entrance of Hebrews . . . [was] one of the sure indications of [California’s] future excellence and permanent prosperity . . . so recognized an element in the social and industrial development of a country [is] this commercial character of the Hebrew.”³

Similarly, the most recent history of American Judaism, a compendious volume, is silent on the subjects of land, farmers, farming, and agriculture, and describes in detail only one Jewish profession besides that of rabbi—the peddler, the quintessential middleman.⁴ The peddler was central in perhaps one of the most infamous depictions of Diasporic Jews, Jacob Riis’s “Jewtown” in *How the Other Half Lives*, where the “ever-present and unfathomable . . . pedlar [sic] [with his] . . . native instinct for money-making” resided. Riis wags his finger, declaring that “thrift is . . . [Judaism’s] cardinal virtue and its foul disgrace,” reminding us that “money is their God. [To a Jew] life itself is of little value compared with even the leanest bank account.”⁵

As they enlarged the imaginary site called Jewtown, social critics like Riis created an urban enclave which became the proper environment for Jews, cementing in people’s minds the connection between Jews, commerce, and the city at the same time that they obscured the long Jewish connection to nature found in the Bible. Jewtown became part of a larger discourse about the imperiled industrial American city of the late nineteenth century and, by implication, defined the territory outside the city, the countryside and

since 1882 (New York, 2004) and Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1973).

³ Hubert Howe Bancroft, “Amador County,” *Bancroft Scraps*, 1:121, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. A notable exception to the Jew-as-“spreader-of-capitalism” storyline is Ava F. Kahn, ed., *Jewish Life in the American West: Perspectives on Migration, Settlement, and Community* (Los Angeles, 2002), especially Ellen Eisenberg’s essay “From Cooperative Farming to Urban Leadership,” 113–31.

⁴ The silence in the historical record regarding Jewish agrarianism coincides with popular racial stereotypes about Jews that excise them from nature. According to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “silences” comprise a form of evidence; in this case, of a cultural complicity to depict Jews outside of the natural space of the nation, a depiction supportive of the dominant non-Jewish power. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995). Treatments of American Judaism that shortchange or omit altogether Jewish agrarianism include (among many) Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley, 2004) and Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, 2004), 68. Ones that do address it tend to be anecdotal, like J. Sanford Rikoon, ed., *Rachel Calof’s Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains* (Bloomington, 1995) and Sophie Trupin, *Dakota Diaspora: Memoirs of a Jewish Homesteader* (Berkeley, 1984). A few scholars who have taken the subject seriously include Gabriel Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers and the Story of the Jewish Agricultural Society* (New York, 1943); Jacob Ornstein-Galicia, *Jewish Farmer in America: The Unknown Chronicle* (Lewiston, NY, 1992); Uri D. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880–1910* (Detroit, 1981); and Ellen Eisenberg, Ava F. Kahn, and William Toll, *Jews of the Pacific Coast: Reinventing Community on America’s Edge* (Seattle, 2009).

⁵ Jacob August Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890; repr., New York, 1997), 83, 87, 91.

burgeoning suburbs, as places of cleanliness and order—and of non-Jewishness.⁶ Along with Jews, Riis colored his New York with Italians and Bohemians (Catholics both), Africans, and Chinese—all groups that throughout the twentieth century have continued to be identified with the city, an identification that concomitantly has upheld the vision of the white, Protestant countryside articulated by Jefferson.

Jewish leaders in the United States and Europe, beset with the task of saving their fellow Jews from the growing tide of hatred and violence in the last decades of the nineteenth century, recognized these stereotypes and understood the cultural weight accorded white Protestants as inheritors of Jefferson's ideal. The most powerful and important Jewish leaders all saw putting Jews on the lands of the New World and enabling them to farm as key to the continued survival of Judaism. They hoped that by convincing the world that Jews could farm, they could change attitudes about them. But they had another reason for bringing Jews to the land. They believed that in order for their culture to survive, Jews must be dispersed away from urban areas where they were targets for attack. By reconnecting Jews to the earth, Christian minds could be changed, and the violence and wandering that Jews had experienced for hundreds of years would finally come to an end.

Diasporic Jews had their own reasons for wanting to live and work on the land. Their culture literally spoke the language of nature and agriculture and, for some, this stream of Judaism found its full voice in the New World. Jews emigrated under the auspices of Jewish philanthropies but also on their own. And in spite of the anti-Semitism that had for millennia kept them in uncertain possession of the land, they came with knowledge of farming.⁷ Many had learned to farm as overseers on large estates in Russia, which had nevertheless placed them in the potentially dangerous, but certainly marginal, position of the middleman. Owning land and farming enabled some Jews to escape this fate, and many Jewish farmers succeeded for generations on the land. But even for those who did not, their encounters with the land left an indelible mark on their lives, for in the countryside they were plunging themselves into one of the most

⁶ Michael H. Ebner, "Re-Reading Suburban America: Urban Population Deconcentration, 1810–1980," *American Quarterly* 37 (Summer 1985): 368–81 and John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820–1939* (New Haven, 1988).

⁷ In Augustine of Hippo's fifth century *City of God*, Christian leaders like Theodosius (AD 347–395) deserved praise and acted righteously for creating laws which prohibited Jews from putting their mark on property, whether slaves or land. Book 16, chapter 8 of the *Codex Theodosianus* (AD 429) is wholly concerned with regulating Jewish life in the Christian empire, including giving authorities the right to confiscate Jewish property. *Codex Theodosianus (Theodosiani libri XVI cum Constitutionibus Sirmondianis)* (Hildesheim, Ger., 2002–2005), 1–29, 887–95. In total, the Christian emperors of the Roman Empire passed sixty-six laws proscribing and regulating the behavior of Jews in the society which, one might argue, codified an anti-Semitic cultural tradition that has continued. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York, 1950), 179; John F. Matthews, *Laying Down the Law: A Study of the Theodosian Code* (New Haven, 2000), 8, 10, 145; and Amnon Linder, ed., *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit, 1987), 151–2.

vital streams of nineteenth-century culture, the Anglo-American agrarianism articulated by Jefferson.⁸ Being a group long disinherited from the land in Christian society, Jews understood both the acceptance and security that having a demonstrable connection to the land of North America could and did afford its possessors.

Jewish philanthropies and Diasporic Jews found common cause in their belief that the land was the key to salvation, but for different reasons. While organizations sought to use the land to assimilate Jews into mainstream American culture—one version of a culture of land—Jews brought with them another, uniquely Jewish, cultural connection to nature. They saw farming as an opportunity for a better life which could include the preservation of their traditional rural ways. But it was also potentially a continuation of an ancient Jewish connection to nature found in the Torah. Highlighting this disconnect between these institutional and individual goals for the American land can provide a more measured understanding of the differences between assimilation, a word with universally negative connotations, and acculturation. Why did assimilation seem like a valid goal for Jewish organizations? And what did it actually mean for Jewish farmers? Did so-called Americanization ironically empower Jews to create more expressive and prosperous lives? In short, was there actually lurking within the seeming erasure of assimilation, the agency of Jews to find fuller expressions of Jewishness within the American polity?

The answers to these questions proposed here are meant more as preliminary rather than definitive conclusions, in what is a much larger and ongoing research endeavor.⁹ Indeed, the first step will be to comprehend the actual size of the movement, something existing scholarship has clearly misrepresented. (See Figure 1.)¹⁰ But setting aside that important work for the moment, this article concentrates on the stated goals and ideologies of two of the major Jewish philanthropic organizations committed to putting Jews on the lands of Canada and the United States—the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society (HEASUSA) and Maurice de Hirsch's Jewish Agricultural Society (JAS)—and

⁸ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York, 1973).

⁹ The completed study will include the many Jewish farming ventures in the East, of which chicken farming was the most successful, as well as those in Australia, Argentina, Russia, and Israel.

¹⁰ Cyril Edel Leonoff, *Wapella Farm Settlement; The First Successful Jewish Farm Settlement in Canada, a Pictorial History* (Winnipeg, 1972), 1, 7, 16, 32; Jewish Agricultural Society, *The Jewish Farmer: 1957 Annual Report* (New York, 1958), 67, 73, 75, 83–4, 86–7; Samuel Joseph, *History of the Baron de Hirsch Fund; The Americanization of the Jewish Immigrant* (Philadelphia, 1935), 33; Abraham J. Peck, ed., *The American Jewish Farmer: An Exhibit* (Cincinnati, 1986), 13; Ellen Eisenberg, "From Cooperative Farming to Urban Leadership," in Kahn, ed., *Jewish Life in the American West*, 115–27; J. Richtik and D. Hutch, "When Jewish Settlers Farmed in Manitoba's Interlake Area," *Canadian Geographical Journal* 95 (August/September 1977): 32–5; Esther Silverstein Blanc, *Berchick* (Volcano, CA, 1989); Esther Silverstein Blanc, *Wars I Have Seen: The Play, in Three Acts, with Selected Short Stories* (Volcano, CA, 1996); Trupin, *Dakota Diaspora*; and Linda Mack Schloff, *And Prairie Dogs Weren't Kosher: Jewish Women in the Upper Midwest since 1855* (St. Paul, 1996), 42, 47–50, 117–8, 135–6.

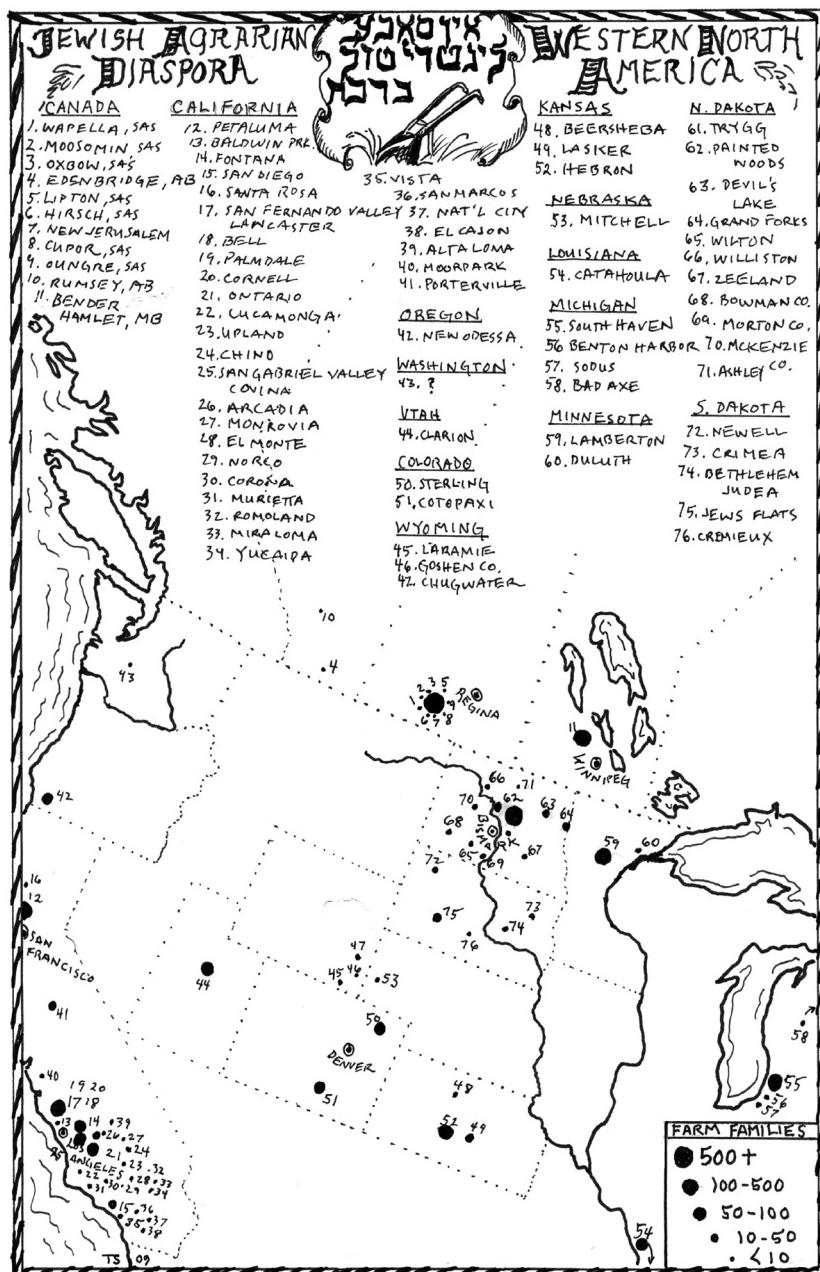


Figure 1. The Jewish Agrarian Diaspora: Western North America, showing location and concentration of Jewish farming families as of 1958. Map by author.

a selection of case studies of Jewish agrarians, in order to illuminate these questions of assimilation and acculturation. Focusing on the processes and ironies of assimilation necessarily points to sources which come mainly from the cultural lodestone of the United States and Canada—the West. Both of these nations have enshrined their pioneers as the titans of their national identities, while they have supported their expansionist endeavors that displaced indigenous peoples with state-sponsored land-distribution acts. Both Jewish philanthropies and individuals took advantage of these cheap lands, giving Jews a role in larger state-run programs of settlement and conquest. After about 1930, de Hirsch, believing that Jews had become too concentrated in North America, changed the focus of his efforts to Argentina and Australia, both “pioneer countries” in which indigenous populations were displaced.¹¹ This expansionist aspect of the Jewish agrarian Diaspora is the reason that this is a story best told within western historical discourses.¹²

As Mary Antin wrote in her memoir recounting her family’s voyage from Russia to the United States in 1899, *From Plotzk to Boston*, talk of “the magic land”—America—bubbled up “in everybody’s mouth.”¹³ Jews heading west, like the Antins, populated the cities of Europe, which became either permanent or temporary homes for Russian Jews. Morris Abraham Cohen, who eventually became a cowboy on the prairies of Saskatchewan, was the child of immigrant Polish Jews. He grew up in London, where he loitered around Yiddish theaters like the Pavilion, which he called the “rallying-place for all East-End Jewry.” “Jews from everywhere,” rubbed elbows in the East End, according to Cohen; “hasidim . . . in their loose black coats shuffling along to . . . [their] Yeshivas; Pollacks and Litvaks, Lithuanian Jews, and Russian and Dutch and Spanish Jews.” It was there that around 1890 his parents had heard “the great Dr. Herzl” call for settlers to a Zionist state in Palestine.¹⁴

Cohen’s familiar depiction of urban Jewry masked how many of these Jews had already been people of the land and had only recently been forced into cities. Part of the allure of the “magic land” was just that: the opportunity to return to the land in order to farm. Alexander II liberated the serfs on 3 March 1861, as part of liberal reforms meant to transform Russia’s land tenure from feudal to freehold. Jews who had been farming alongside their Christian neighbors as tenants or who had been overseers became targets of the violence and terror of the pogroms; they also were at a dis-

¹¹ The larger study will build on work begun by Daniel Judah Elazar, *Jewish Communities in Frontier Societies—Argentina, Australia, and South Africa* (New York, 1983).

¹² For Jews as part of imperial settlement campaigns in “frontier” lands, see Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt’s Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley, 2003), 295–9, 307–16. A scholar who sees the Diaspora of Russian Jews in terms of larger structural forces, although at the cost of discounting transplanted cultures of, for example, agrarianism, is Eli Lederhendler, *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880–1920: From Caste to Class* (New York, 2009), 118–22.

¹³ Mary Antin, *From Plotzk to Boston* (Boston, 1899), 11–2.

¹⁴ Charles Drage, *The Life and Times of General Two-Gun Cohen* (New York, 1954), 4, 6, 7.

advantage because they could not purchase land. The Russian state began a veritable ethnic cleansing campaign in which Jews were taken from the land and herded into cities in order to push them away from the heartland of Russia to its peripheries. The state recognized that Jews wanted to own land, so Alexander made it available for them to purchase in the far west of Russia in Bessarabia (or Moldavia) and Kherson (on the banks of the Black Sea)—but Jews continued to be unable to own land in other parts of Russia. By 1865, an estimated 33,000 Jews farmed in these areas.¹⁵ But, according to Ben Barish, a Wapella, Saskatchewan, farmer, even Jews who “weren’t allowed to have farms” gained specialized farming knowledge because they worked “for a ‘poritz,’” or landlord, as overseers. Barish’s grandfather Klenman had emigrated from London to Saskatchewan with the ability to tightly weave straw to make a unique kind of Russian roof that drained water.¹⁶ In Russia, organizations like the General Jewish Workers League, or Bund, believed that Jewish security could be—in part—attained through land ownership.¹⁷ By 1924, some 40,000 Jews were farming the Russian land in the Crimea. This program expanded with the agricultural settlement (that continues to this day) at Birobidzhan, which brought Jews from all over the world and totaled 36,000 square kilometers—an expansiveness possible because of the colony’s location in Siberia. Thus, although Birobidzhan continued the process of pushing Jews to the periphery, it, and other Jewish agriculturalists, demonstrated that many Jews had a preexisting tradition on the land and a desire to farm.¹⁸

In spite of these limited opportunities for Jews to farm in Russia, many believed they stood a better chance in the Americas. In 1906, 125,000 Jews left Russia bound for North America; among them were probably William Leonoff and Solomon Barish, who, along with forty other families, arrived in Wapella to begin farming the land.¹⁹ (See Figure 2.) That year, *The Jewish Farmer* stated that Jews were “flocking to the country, buying up old, neglected, run-down farms in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey in the hope of finding shelter and some means of subsistence for themselves and their families.” By 1911, A. L. Shalit reported that there were 5,000 full-time Jewish farmers in the United States, and “although many of them were struggling, the desire of having a piece of land . . . is very strong in these men, who in their own country have been denied the right to such ownership.”²⁰ Jacob Levin saw firsthand this desire. A farmer himself in South Haven, Michigan, Levin formed the nucleus of a growing Jewish

¹⁵ Robert Alan Goldberg, *Back to the Soil: The Jewish Farmers of Clarion, Utah, and Their World* (Salt Lake City, 1986), 6, 9–10, 12–5.

¹⁶ Leonoff, *Wapella Farm Settlement*, 1, 12.

¹⁷ Goldberg, *Back to the Soil*, 9–13.

¹⁸ Jewish Agricultural Society, *Annual Report 1957–58* and *The Jewish Farmer*, 74, Dorot Jewish Division [Judaica Collection], New York Public Library (hereafter Judaica Collection) and Fred Skolnick, ed., *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, MI, 2007), 17:54, 5.

¹⁹ Goldberg, *Back to the Soil*, 18 and Leonoff, *Wapella Farm Settlement*, ii.

²⁰ JAS, *Annual Report 1957–58*, 54, 86.



Figure 2. Women pitching hay at the Barish farm, Wapella, Saskatchewan. Photo courtesy of Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada.

agricultural enclave in his part of the state, which counted 104 Jewish farms in 1901 and 125 by 1911. He recalled how, in 1916, he welcomed a group of Jewish homesteaders to his farm who had succeeded in gaining title to government lands in Nebraska and Wyoming by “proving up,” staying continuously on their lands for five years. They then sold their lands and used the proceeds to move to South Haven, a larger Jewish community, in order to give “Jewish training” to their children. Stories like these inspired other Jews, recently arrived in America’s cities, to return to the land. These “city folks’ dreamed of farming,” Levin said, and they sought him out for advice and guidance. His council came in the form of “the well-known tune ‘in the plow lies the blessing.’” “But,” Levin warned, “between the dream and the reality . . . [lay] a long road.”²¹

Another way of understanding the Jewish agricultural tradition is through Zionism, the other social movement in Russia seeking to save Jews by returning them to the

²¹ Ibid., 71, 86–7.

land.²² The main criticism of Bundists by Zionists was that their concept of a Jewish nationalism lacked “a territorial dimension.”²³ Some Jews, no matter how welcome they had felt in other countries, could not separate the idea of Jewish autonomy from the land of Palestine, as the famed poet Jehuda-Halevi expressed:

All the beauties and treasures of Spain are worthless as dust, in mine eyes:
But the dust of the Lord’s ruined house, as a treasure of beauty I prize.²⁴

By 1925, there were 5,000 Zionist farmers in Palestine. This image of Jews tilling the soil in an autonomous Jewish homeland on the location promised by Yahweh galvanized support for Israel, even if the vast majority of Jews would never pull up roots to move to Palestine.²⁵

But many Jews like Harry Jacobson, who ended up in Wapella around 1886, did not see Zion as their homeland but rather Russia; and they only left it as discrimination made it ever more difficult to live as they chose. “The Jewish people did not have the same rights as the Russians had,” Jacobson explained. “Their laws made me mad because the Jews were not allowed to occupy themselves at farming. They foolishly thought that [Jews] . . . did not have the ability to farm. Then I had to go in the army. So instead I thought it would be better to prove that a Jew could be a farmer just as well as a Russian could.” Another Wapella settler, Eli Barish, remembered that his grandfather was “an agricultural man. He was working as an overseer for some large estate in Russia. He was always on horseback.”²⁶

In their centuries-long role as middlemen, Jews served the powerful by providing “sin services,” like money lending or labor on Sunday, as well as doing a number of key ancillary agricultural jobs such as resale of goods, trading, or finishing. Though Christians needed Jews to perform these services, they also resented them during hard economic times. One Jewish immigrant farmer to Canada, William Leonoff, remembered that when ship workers went on strike in his Crimean town, “they used the Jews as scapegoats and had what they call a ‘pogrom,’ with armed bands roaming the streets.” Solomon Barish, an emigrant from Bessarabia in the last years of the nineteenth century, recounted a story that highlights the Jews’ powerful attraction to throwing off the constraints of the intermediary position and returning to the land. Barish had agreed to sell a bill of goods on the streets of Montreal, to act as a peddler. One day he had enough with the peddler’s life. As he described it, he dropped

²² On state-sponsored land settlement in Israel, Daniel Miron, Leonard B. Kaye Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature, Department of Middle-Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures, Columbia University, e-mail message to author, 21 February 2007.

²³ Goldberg, *Back to the Soil*, 14.

²⁴ Jehuda-Halevi, quoted in Samuel W. Goldstein, letter to the editor, “Only Zion for the Jews,” *New York Times*, 13 September 1903.

²⁵ Goldberg, *Back to the Soil*, 12.

²⁶ Leonoff, *Wapella Farm Settlement*, 6, 22.

the pack, hitchhiked back to town, and headed “out west to farm . . . [for] he was a lover of land.”²⁷

Around 1882, Jewish philanthropists recognized Jewish immigrants’ desire to own land and be farmers. “Very shortly after the arrival of a large number of refugees in this country,” recounted Michael Heilprin, founder and chairman of the Montefiore Agricultural Aid Society (MAAS) and “the leading spirit” (according to Samuel Joseph, chronicler of de Hirsch’s JAS) of the HEASUSA, “. . . we became cognizant of the fact . . . that . . . there were not a few whose firm determination . . . [it was] to devote themselves to agricultural pursuits . . . There were elderly men who had tasted all the wretchedness, and had felt the shame, of Jewish trading life in Russia; but side-by-side with them, strenuous youths . . . [with] the fixed purpose of becoming pioneers of their down-trodden and decried people in a field of natural, useful and redeeming activity.” Heilprin saw Jews’ desire for the farming life as synonymous with the pioneers but with an additional objective besides survival—they also had to be useful and help their beleaguered countrymen. For philanthropic organizations this complex of goals came under the omnibus heading of Americanization.²⁸

Although de Hirsch was the wealthiest and most well-known Jewish philanthropist dedicating funds to the project of Jewish agrarianism, he had a precursor in Heilprin, who in 1882 had helped organize two Jewish farming settlements at Catahoula, Louisiana, and Cotopaxi, Colorado, under the auspices of HEASUSA, and then went on to establish MAAS, which founded nine new agricultural colonies starting in 1884. These early attempts to connect Jews to the land demonstrate the exuberance of Jewish philanthropies in their hopes that the land would transform Jewish minds and bodies and are important for what they reveal about the power of a culture of the land in American society. They also show how out of touch philanthropies were with the practical hardships of planting Jewish agrarianism in the soils of North America.²⁹

The man charged with the task of promoting HEASUSA’s Catahoula agrarians, J. Stanwood Menken, felt “that never has such a colony organized under more favorable conditions.” His roseate predictions were printed in a pamphlet along with the constitution of Catahoula as a vehicle for publicizing these intrepid farmers. The main thrust

²⁷ Ibid., 5.

²⁸ Joseph, *Baron de Hirsch Fund*, frontispiece, 5 and Michael Heilprin quoted in Gustav Pollak, *Michael Heilprin and His Sons: A Biography* (New York, 1912), 207–8. The JAS was part of the umbrella fund called the Baron de Hirsch Fund, which included the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA). Americanization was a cultural program integrally wedded to agrarianism, a point most scholars of American Judaism seem to have overlooked; for example, see Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 173.

²⁹ Joseph, *Baron de Hirsch Fund*, 9. Montefiore was the enormously wealthy British financier and funder of early settlements in Israel. Sources differ on the dates of Montefiore’s American settlements—either 1882 or 1884. Lloyd David Harris, “Chapter VII: Montefiore: ‘No Water Here,’” in “Sod Jerusalems: Jewish Agricultural Communities in Frontier Kansas” (master’s thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1984), <http://www.kancoll.org/books/harris/sodcontents.htm> (accessed 21 July 2007).

of this document was that Jews could transform from wanderers into solid civic role models through farming. “To the people of Louisiana” it began, “[this colony’s] goal is to aid and assist Immigrants [sic] . . . so that they may become permanent citizens of the State.” Herman Rosenthal, the president of the colony, assured Louisianans that the Jewish colonists “are desirous [of becoming] free and useful citizens . . . [and will] be mindful of [their] sacred duties.” The roster of colonists shows the professional diversity of immigrant Jews amongst which farming was high on the list. Of the fifty-one male and thirty-four female adults (there were also sixty-six children), twelve were merchants and eleven were farmers. There were also three teachers, one lawyer, one carpenter, one bookkeeper, one typesetter, one cigarette maker, six clerks, one student, two tobacco cutters, one tinsmith, one saddler, one professor, one tobacco manufacturer, and seven laborers. They all had expressed a strong desire to lead an agricultural life. This mix of people shows how many non-farmers were desirous of working and living on the land and goes against traditional depictions of Jews as urban middlemen.³⁰

Part of the story Menken was crafting in his pamphlet included showing how non-Jewish Louisianans welcomed Jews into their midst but also that the agrarian endeavor would connect Jews to broader themes in American culture such as the pursuit of happiness and freedom of religion. He wrote that “the citizens of Harrisburg, Catahoula Parish . . . met in a mass meeting . . . for the purpose of inviting . . . a number of Russian[s], lately driven from their homes by religious intolerance, [to seek] the shores of America for the purpose of enjoying civil and political liberty.” William Harris, the state commissioner of agriculture and immigration, took a paternalistic pride in helping Jews connect to the land. He wanted, he said, “to show the world that the Hebrew is not only a commercial man, but that if he puts his plow-share into the ground, the land will teem with abundance.” Harris did not aim to replace the commercial with the agrarian; probably like Bancroft, he believed that Jewish business acumen was vital for the growing state of Louisiana. But what he and the state were offering was an opportunity for Jews to plunge their plow blades into the American earth—that is, into American culture—and in so doing, to become part of the community. In turn, Governor John McEnery pledged the protection of the state government, “a promise supported by the citizens of Harrisburg, who gifted the settlers with a Hand and Horse Cotton Press and six horses and two mules to go with it.”³¹

Sadly, one thing Louisiana and the locals of Harrisburg could not control was the capricious Mississippi that swept away the colony like an afterthought with the first flood of the season.³² But some Jews’ desire to farm, like other non-Jewish homesteaders, proved to be resilient in spite of this setback. The 173 colonists from Kiev and Elizabethgrad withdrew what little money they had deposited with the HEASUSA

³⁰ J. Stanwood Menken, *Report on the Formation of the First Russian Jewish Colony in the United States at Catahoula Parish, Louisiana* (New York, 1882), 4, 5, 16–8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³² *Ibid.*, 18.

and dispersed into the United States—some to San Antonio, others to St Louis, and still others to purchase farms in Kansas and Missouri.³³ Failure claimed many farmers, not just Jews. Pulling up stakes and moving on proved to be the rule rather than the exception for all immigrants looking for a livelihood on the western land.

Fresh from Cotopaxi, Julius Schwarz, the other publicist for HEASUSA, arrived at the board's annual meeting in New York City with a two and a half-pound potato and a beet that weighed "about nine pounds." He was giddy with the prospects for the colony. The vegetables were representative of Cotopaxi's bumper crops of "perfect giants" of produce: 45,000 pounds of potatoes, 140,000 pounds of cabbages, and in one case, 45 tons of carrots from a single acre—all produced by Jews.³⁴ The image of a giant potato and an enormous beet sitting on a glossy boardroom conference table in a city office building perfectly symbolized both the hopes and agendas of Jewish philanthropic organizations. These robust roots were the evidence that Jews could farm and in so doing be redeemed by the land and brought into the mainstream culture of America. At the same time, it was HEASUSA's job to publicize that fact to wealthy funders who mostly lived in the city.

Like Catahoula, Cotopaxi also failed within one year, and, like the Louisiana colony, HEASUSA's marketing campaign revealed much about the Protestant agrarian culture of America as well as visions of how Jews could be integrated into it. Cotopaxi's propagandist emphasized another important aspect of that culture—the patriarchal identity of the land embodied by the men who grappled and triumphed over nature. Were Jews "fit to become farmers?" Schwarz thought the *ad hominem* argument was the best answer: "let the Christian see the Jew." Let them see these hale Jewish men like Zadek, "a carpenter, but . . . one of the best farmers . . . who is living proof that Russians are by no means that stiff-necked lazy people for which they are taken." Let them see how "they have broken up the ground with a shovel, . . . have done the hardest part of the work required to make a wagon bridge, . . . filled ditches with big rocks which they were compelled to cut and hew from the mountains; [see how] they went up to their throats in the swift Arkansas River . . . [to work] in dark, damp mines . . . on the railroad, . . . [and] walked twenty miles a day to chop wood." All these things the Jews of Cotopaxi did to lift themselves from the "ever burdening claims of poverty and desolation" and show themselves equal to Americans.³⁵

And according to P. M. Carroll, an officer of the Gunnison Division of the Denver and Rio Grande Railway, they were up to the job. "Your folks are first class workers," he said, "the only drawback with [them] is, that they work too fast; you can see how

³³ JewishEncyclopedia.com, s.v. "Rosenthal," <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=906&letter=A&search=agricultural%20colonies> (accessed 19 February 2007).

³⁴ Julius Schwarz, *Report of Mr. Julius Schwarz on the Colony of Russian Refugees at Cotopaxi, Colorado, Established by the Hebrew Emigrant Aide Society of the United States, 1882* (New York, 1882), 3, 11. Even though there were twenty-nine females out of sixty persons in Cotopaxi, all of the stories are about men.

³⁵ Ibid., 2, 4–5, 13–4.

anxious they are to show their working abilities." HEASUSA's Schwarz reported that the work had been like a tonic for a man named Chorovsky, "whose farm looks like a flower garden." He had been a "boisterous rebel," Schwarz recounted, and "a quarrelsome creature [but now] has become a placid, peaceful man who likes his home." Indeed, Schwarz promised that the genial climate would cure "the most delicate invalid . . . [so that his] hollow chest [would] expand, [his] sluggish step [be] quickened into activity, [his] sunken eye grow bright, the weakened or undeveloped muscles gain wonderfully in strength, all within a few months."³⁶ We can see in this story the late nineteenth-century belief in the health-giving benefits of the West. But what is key here is that Jews would not be immune from the power of the American land and would blossom through the tough love of the Protestant work ethic.³⁷

The Baron de Hirsch Fund, founded in 1900, "attacked the problem of the adjustment and assimilation of the immigrant Jewish population from many angles," as its 1935 self-published history describes, and its central funding organization was the JAS, which became the largest and most successful philanthropy dispersing Jews out of cities and into possession of the land.³⁸ Samuel Joseph gave credit to Heilprin and HEASUSA's early efforts, but he noted that the fund sought to build on those attempts with a more systematic, three-tiered program. First, it put Jews on the land as individual owners (rather than the joint-stock structure of HEASUSA's colonies) using the homestead acts of the United States and Canada in many cases, but in others, by providing the security for Jews to get loans. Second, it educated Jews in farming practices by means of their publication, *The Jewish Farmer*, through experts they sent into the field, and with their agricultural residential college in Woodbine, New Jersey. And third, it took this "proof" that Jews could farm and deployed it in publicity campaigns to convince the wider public that the chosen people naturally belonged on the land.

The JAS and de Hirsch saw Jewish agrarianism as the means to two larger goals: the Americanization of Jews and their salvation from violence through dispersal into the countryside.³⁹ To the JAS, assimilation was not a dirty word. In fact, the group patted itself on the back for anticipating "to a surprising degree, many of the social techniques which have now become commonplace as in social engineering." To the JAS, this meant getting Jews to farm. The implication was that being a farmer was tantamount

³⁶ Ibid., 6, 12, 13.

³⁷ Gregg Mitman, Michelle Murphey, and Christopher Sellers, eds., *Osiris Volume 19: Landscapes of Exposure: Knowledge and Illness in Modern Environments* (Chicago, 2004) and Conevery Bolton Valenčius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York, 2002).

³⁸ Joseph, *Baron de Hirsch Fund*, frontispiece. The JAS and other Jewish philanthropies pioneered social welfare programs such as removal, farm loans, and farm cooperatives. See, Abraham Cronbach, "Jewish Pioneering in American Social Welfare," *American Jewish Archives* 3 (June 1951): 51–81.

³⁹ George E. Pozzetta, ed., *Americanization, Social Control, and Philanthropy* (New York, 1991).



Figure 3. Jacob Karlin standing in his field of potatoes near Calverton, Long Island, 23 June 1932.
Photo reproduced for Baron de Hirsch Fund by The Jewish Publication Society, Joseph 1935.

to being an American. By the same token, Jefferson's vision of the yeomen guaranteed that Jews would be dispersed and therefore safe. The baron had noticed that whenever Jews became visible in large groups, they became "hated as . . . outcast[s]." At first, he believed the United States was the ideal place to enact his diaspora of salvation, but he gradually grew worried by the "already enormous number of Jews in the United States" and became "convinced that the Argentine Republic, Canada, and Australia above all others, offer[ed] the surest guarantee for the accomplishment of this plan."⁴⁰

Like HEASUSA, the JAS and de Hirsch equated the work of farming with being enfranchised in the American polity. In an interview, de Hirsch said the main goal of the JAS was to "reawaken in the race [the] capacity and love for agriculture" that would enable Jews to become "independent, self-respecting and self-reliant farm owners."⁴¹ The poster child for the JAS of this sturdy Jeffersonian Jewish yeoman was Jacob Karlin, whose story and picture was the centerpiece of the JAS's history. Karlin was a Latvian Jew who had emigrated in 1890 and became a bantamweight prizefighter in New York's Lower East Side. With his prize money and the funds earned by his wife (who also raised six children), the Karlins managed to buy a farm on Long Island, the

⁴⁰ Joseph, *Baron de Hirsch Fund*, ix, 276, 277.

⁴¹ JAS, *Annual Report 1957–58*, 74, Judaica Collection.

JAS reported, “in the very heart of Ku Kluxism,” where they prospered. The JAS photographed him standing in a sea of Irish Cobbler potatoes, the sun glancing off his sunburnt face, cracked with a weary smile. (See Figure 3.) Not only was Karlin a successful farmer, but he was obviously sturdy and strong.⁴²

Using the various U.S. homestead acts (1862–1935) and the Dominion Lands Act in Canada (1872), along with the JAS’s agricultural boarding school and *The Jewish Farmer*, de Hirsch put into action his plan to disperse the Jews onto the land and to, as he wrote, “teach young men [to be] true tillers of the soil.”⁴³ In 1900, the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society of New York (JAIASNY—the successor to the JAS in the United States) removed 836 Jews to New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New England. In 1901, the number climbed to 2,104, and the areas of settlement expanded to include the entire South (except North Carolina), all the prairie states (including Indian Territory), as well as Oregon, California, and Canada—thirty-seven states in all. By 1902, 3,208 persons were removed to forty-five states, and in 1903, the JAS in the United States settled 10,000 Jews in all forty-five states as well as Indian Territory and Wyoming. Not all of the relocated Jews went to the land to farm. Some brought their much-needed skills to middle-American cities and rural towns. Others, like those whom Levin encountered in South Haven, Michigan, only used the land as a stepping-stone to build stronger lives within Diasporic Jewish communities. The JAS did keep statistics on those it knew to be farming, both with their aid and on their own. In 1911, it reported 5,000 Jews at work farming in the United States. By 1927, the total had jumped to 80,000, a small yet significant portion of the 4,228,000 Jews in the country at the time.⁴⁴

These numbers are far from conclusive because it is clear that many Jews, like those already described from Wapella, organized their returns to the land without the help of philanthropies like the JAS. More research must be conducted in order to comprehend the full scope of the Jewish agrarian Diaspora. But what the following stories of these farmers and homesteaders show is that their desire to farm had not been implanted through the efforts of Jewish philanthropies. These Jews traveled great distances, took enormous risks, and worked very hard because they saw farming as their natural and inherited vocation. And while they appeared to fulfill the Jeffersonian ideal that Jewish philanthropies promoted, they became sturdy yeomen in their own, uniquely Jewish, ways.

Becky Kahn, daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants, remembered that “Wapella and Moosomin were our towns.”⁴⁵ The Kahns, Leonoffs, Barishes, and more than forty

⁴² Joseph, Baron de Hirsch Fund, 124–5.

⁴³ The JAS school at Woodbine remained active for almost fifty years. Seth Korelitz, “Historical Note,” undated, Baron de Hirsch Fund Records, I-80, American Jewish Historical Society, Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

⁴⁴ Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society of New York, *Annual Report, 1900–1909*, 17, 54, Judaica Collection.

⁴⁵ Leonoff, *Wapella Farm Settlement*, 7.

other Jewish farming families who settled around these towns in Saskatchewan around 1889 were, to quote a historian of Canadian expansion, “amongst the early settlers of Western Canada.”⁴⁶ Their community eventually totaled approximately 200 persons who tilled over 10,000 acres and lasted for more than fifty years. Expelled from one country, they came as the newest possessors of contested lands that had recently been rocked by the Indian and Métis rebellion of 1885.⁴⁷ Wapella and Moosomin were two of a number of Jewish farm towns in western Canada in relatively close proximity to each other that show how residents built networks of support in the land. Within 50 miles they had Jewish farming neighbors in New Jerusalem, Lipton, and Hirsch (on the U.S.-Canada border), and within 100 miles at Oxbow, Cupor, Oungre, Red Deer, and Hoffer. At 125 miles were Bender Hamlet and Edenbridge. Far to the west, south of Edmonton, Alberta, was a lone outpost of Jews at the village of Rumsey.⁴⁸

These Jews on the prairie demonstrated remarkable creativity in attaining and farming the western land and offer a persuasive, if preliminary, picture of how Jews forged rural North American identities that were far from assimilated. Possibly this was because they were free from the ideological agendas of organizations like the HEASUSA and the JAS. However, they were not above asking for and taking help offered by Jewish philanthropic organizations. Jews founded the autonomous farming communities of Wapella, Moosomin, and Lipton, yet they probably chose the Wapella area because the JAS had been at work for the previous five years establishing the communities of Hirsch, Oxbow, and Red Deer. Starting in 1884, the JAS provided houses, horses, cattle, implements, seed, and provisions for three years to forty-nine families at its namesake settlement of Hirsch. Soon the community acquired twenty-four additional homesteads for the sons, sons-in-law, and other relatives and friends of the original colonists, making a total of seventy-three farms cultivating 11,680 acres in all.⁴⁹ A devastating frost and severe drought two years in row, followed by a fire that destroyed much of their stored hay, forced the residents to relocate to the nearby JAS town of Oxbow.⁵⁰ Other Russian Jews tried to put down roots in the Red Deer district

⁴⁶ Robert England, *The Colonization of Western Canada; A Study of Contemporary Land Settlement (1896–1934)* (London, 1936), 274.

⁴⁷ Robert Wiebe and Bob Beal, eds., *War in the West: Voices of the 1885 Rebellion* (Toronto, 1985).

⁴⁸ Wapella History Book Committee, *Mingling Memories: A History of Wapella and Districts* (Altona, MB, 1979), 184; Richtik and Hutch, “When Jewish Settlers Farmed,” 32–5; *JewishEncyclopedia.com*, s.v. “Agricultural Colonies in Canada,” (by Max Rosenthal), <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=906&letter=A&search=agricultural%20colonies> (accessed 19 February 2007); *JewishEncyclopedia.com*, s.v. “Agricultural Colonies in the United States,” (by Max Rosenthal), <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=909&letter=A&search=agricultural%20colonies> (accessed 5 December 2009); and Michael Usiskin, *Uncle Mike’s Edenbridge: Memoirs of a Jewish Pioneer Farmer* (Winnipeg, 1983).

⁴⁹ Rosenthal, “Agricultural Colonies in Canada.”

⁵⁰ Richtik and Hutch, “When Jewish Settlers Farmed,” 33–5. Rosenthal dates the founding of Oxbow as 1891.

with the help of benefactors from Chicago, only to suffer severe hardship in 1895. They petitioned the JAS for assistance, which in turn gave them farm implements and permission to take over the abandoned farms at Hirsch.⁵¹ Once the Wapella Jews settled, a period of severe hardship drove them to take out loans from the JAS—loans that, they were careful to point out when interviewed, were paid back within seventeen years.⁵² Thus, while organizations like the JAS certainly had an Americanization agenda that included fostering Jewish agriculture, they were also responding to the ongoing and diverse needs of Jews who were living and working on the land.

Fanny Pelenovsky Brotman—raised in Wapella—recalled that her father came to Canada because of an uncle who wrote to him in Russia and said, “[C]ome to America because the government gives [sic] 160 acres for \$10.” Abraham Klenman, a former plantation overseer from Bessarabia who had immigrated to Montreal in 1888, “agitated effectively among his Jewish neighbors, with the result that by the fall of 1887, he . . . [was traveling West to] find . . . land suitable for settlement.” With the help of an official from the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), Klenman not only founded a string of homesteads, but he negotiated to have the railroad exchange their lands (surveyed so that the CPR and the Canadian government had alternating quarter sections) for government lands, thus allowing Klenman and his neighbors to farm contiguously. The purpose of this reconfiguring of the Jeffersonian ideal of the individual farm plot was entirely religious and cultural. In order to worship, Orthodox Jews had to form a *minyan*, which was the ten adult males necessary to conduct worship, and all family members of this *minyan* had to be able to come together without “work” on the Sabbath. The negotiations with the CPR allowed for the formation of three *minyans*.⁵³

Besides networks of mutual support, Diasporic Jews transported their traditional farm village structures to western Canada. Bender Hamlet, located north and east of Winnipeg, was a Jewish farming community built around the *Strassendorf*, or village street layout, which entailed one street, with houses facing each other, set in the middle of a large expanse of acreage. As in Wapella and Moosomin, settlers accomplished this by acquiring both government and railroad sections so that their lands composed one continuous piece. By 1923, approximately one hundred Jews farmed 8,100 acres; they grew wheat and oats, and raised horses, cows, and poultry. A rabbi named Jacob Bender, who had settled in 1902 on his own quarter section of land close to other earlier Jewish settlers, organized the town. The summer after his first year Bender traveled to England and Russia to recruit newcomers and received their powers of attorney in order to file for lands with the Canadian government. He used the *Strassendorf* town plan as a selling point because all of his potential recruits had traditionally lived in agricultural villages. By 1903, the houses were built and filled with nineteen families. Pictures show a

⁵¹ Rosenthal, “Agricultural Colonies in Canada.”

⁵² Wapella History Book Committee, *Mingling Memories*, 184 and Leonoff, *Wapella Farm Settlement*, 1.

⁵³ Leonoff, *Wapella Farm Settlement*, 4, 6, 7, 32 and Samuel Krauss, *Minjan* (Vienna, 1933).

neat, long row of whitewashed log homes with limestone footings, shingled roofs, and gingerbread trim. In one photo, Frank Lavitt appears in his kitchen garden feeding his chickens. (See Figure 4.) He wears a cylindrical hat, like a train conductor's cap, and sports a handlebar mustache. The yard is resplendent with quaking aspens, approximately five years old, fluttering in the wind. The look of pride and happiness shows on Lavitt's face. The town prospered until 1920, when farm prices crashed. Soon afterward, one of its leaders committed suicide, and the settlement was virtually abandoned in 1932, when only one family remained.⁵⁴

Another cultural tradition Jewish farmers imported was the idea of *landsman-shaftn*, or rural or land clubs. These were Diasporic fraternal organizations that functioned as insurance programs to help widows and orphans pay for medical care and burial expenses and as nuclei around which Jews could build community.⁵⁵ They were usually made up of members of one village or region.⁵⁶ In Wapella, the "Maccabees—Fraternal and Benevolent Jewish Society" organized the *shochet*, the kosher butcher who would come and ritually slaughter prairie chickens for a family, so that they could remain kosher. The dictates of kosher eating also required that the prairie chickens be trapped, not shot, which became the job of some of the children of the community.⁵⁷ In Hirsch, club member Norman Abood opened up his little white house that had a Star of David on the west gable so that locals could worship.⁵⁸ HEASUSA's Cotopaxi colony had the *Ohev Sholem* (Lovers of Peace), also known as the Congregation and Mutual Relief Society, that received the gift of a *Sephar Thora*, a Torah that two female colonists then lovingly decorated.⁵⁹ On the other hand, Jewish farmers were able to use the standing in the community their land ownership afforded them to participate in non-Jewish clubs. Solomon Barish, who was the first and only Jew inducted into the Wapella Masons, was held in such high esteem that the club changed their regular meeting day (Saturday) to accommodate his religious worship.⁶⁰

All of these examples of Jews transplanting their Russian—and, in some cases, rural—cultural traditions to the soil of North America should not overshadow the almost "insurmountable difficulties," as one historian of the Wapella colony described

⁵⁴ Richtik and Hutch, "When Jewish Settlers Farmed," 32–5. This settlement may have also used some funds from the JAS.

⁵⁵ Daniel Soyer, "Transnationalism and Americanization in East European Jewish Immigrant Public Life," in *Imagining the American Jewish Community*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Waltham, MA, 2007), 47–67.

⁵⁶ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 158.

⁵⁷ Wapella History Book Committee, *Mingling Memories*, 23 and Leonoff, *Wapella Farm Settlement*, 5.

⁵⁸ Doug Gent, "Doug Gent's South-Eastern Saskatchewan Canada Index Page," http://members.tripod.com/doug_gent/hirschhistory.html (accessed 17 April 2007).

⁵⁹ Schwarz, *Report of Mr. Julius Schwarz*, 3, 14.

⁶⁰ Leonoff, *Wapella Farm Settlement*, 22.



Figure 4. Frank Lavitt in his garden in Bender Hamlet, Manitoba, 1916. Photo reproduced with permission from Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Richtik and Hutch 1977.

it, that Jews faced in becoming farmers on the prairies of Saskatchewan.⁶¹ Certainly anti-Semitism was on the rise in North America in the last years of the nineteenth century.⁶² Yet rarely, if at all, did Jewish agrarians say that they had experienced discrimination. Indeed, they told stories of intercultural cooperation. Eli Barish recounted a story about his grandfather Klenman, who had sat down on his plow in the middle of the prairie weeping tears of frustration because he could not get the device to go into the ground and cut the sod. A Gentile neighbor stopped and asked him what was wrong and showed him the adjustable guide that regulated the depth of the blade. After this, the plow cut fine. Although many Jews had been farmers in Russia or overseers

⁶¹ Ibid., 3, 31.

⁶² Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 209.

on large estates as Klenman had been, farming practices were regional, making some of the knowledge they had garnered useless in the arid West. Sam Barish had learned how to farm by hand; he was unfamiliar with mechanized tools. He and his family had been used to farming communally, and they "weren't familiar with private ownership," he explained. "In Canada, each farmer had his own farm and operated his own equipment, as an individual unit." Some Jews learned farming practices by hiring out as day laborers on more established farms.⁶³

With the Barishes we see how the culture of living in and on the land could span generations. As an overseer in Russia, Klenman Barish worked with the soil but could not own it. He came to the open spaces of Wapella and began to cultivate his own patch of earth. His son-in-law Sam recalled that "we grew up on the farm. We got to know the ins and outs of farm life. Eventually I had my own farm and was independent." Sam's son Eli was among the next generation of Jewish farmers who attended one of the regional agricultural colleges and later taught newcomers who wanted the same life but had no previous knowledge. This was the case with Maggie Wasserman Brownstone's father. Farming was "very hard work for a man like my father," she explained, "who had been a scholar all his life." He came to Canada with no experience but a strong yearning to farm. He later worked the land in Wapella, where he learned how to farm, and then broke sod in Oxbow at his own place. His desire to farm finally found expression in a place where a Jew could own land.⁶⁴

Besides economic empowerment, Wapella's Jewish agrarians spoke eloquently about the quality of life they felt they had found on the land. Ben Barish spoke with pride about his seventy years on the farm: "Here I am a small man weighing only 150 pounds [and during my time] I shoveled thousands of bushels of grain, and nothing hurt me." He admitted that in his early twenties he began to get a little restless on the farm and wanted to be "well dressed and with plenty of money to spend," like the city people of his imagination. But he found daunting the need to cater to the public and the relentless competition. He explained that "on the farm your competitor is right across the road, and you go across to talk to him. You're friends, working together instead of against each other, to the very last." But interestingly, in spite of his criticism of individual competition, he highlighted the autonomy he felt as a farmer: "You are far enough away so that you are not interfering with your neighbor . . . in the city you can't be independent." Sam Barish also emphasized the independence he found on the farm: "I grew my own crops," he recounted, "went to work when I liked, [and] worked as long a day as I wanted. And if I did not want to work I could quit any time without having to satisfy somebody else . . . Looking back, I don't think there is a finer way of spending a life. When I say finer it's not that you necessarily get the most out of life, but it's the most independent life."⁶⁵ Sam and Eli Barish envisioned their roles within a Canadian society where they

⁶³ Leonoff, *Wapella Farm Settlement*, 22, 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2, 3, 5, 31.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.



Figure 5. Esther Silverstein Blanc upon her discharge from the U.S. Army, 1945. Photo reproduced with permission from Volcano Press, Blanc 1996.

were not powerless and at the whim of the marketplace, like Riis's "unfathomable pedlar." Rather, through the ownership of land, they were able to help define the terms of competition and could label fellow competitors as friends and neighbors.

This sense of independence was something even those Jews who did not become farmers seemed to find through their encounters with the western land. Esther Silverstein Blanc was one such child. (See Figure 5.) She was born in 1913 under the blue sky of Goshen County, Wyoming, to Russian immigrant parents, Simon and Graziella, who had both worked in the garment industry in Pittsburgh before hearing about "free-land" in Wyoming and homesteading a quarter section of land. Her father was not a knowledgeable farmer, but he built strong ties with a local colony of Jewish farmers who had settled across the border outside of Mitchell, Nebraska, aided by the JAS. Growing up amidst the other farm children in the area, Blanc latched on to the identity of a "country girl" to explain her adventurous life; she trained as a nurse and served on the front

lines of the Spanish Civil War, after which she earned a PhD in psychiatric nursing at the age of fifty-nine. But just because she defined herself as a country girl did not mean she ceased thinking of herself as Jewish. Her writings have left a record of the continuance of Jewish culture in a prairie setting, as her description of a *seder* held at her house shows: “The Jews came from all over the valley and stayed the whole eight days of Pasach [sic]. We would get matzohs and all that stuff from Denver on the train. We had Pasach dishes. They were all schlepped up from the basement—service for twelve and all the pots and pans. Mama had brought some of them from Europe.”⁶⁶ In her autobiographical children’s book *Berchick*, Blanc writes about a neighboring family, the Libbys, who were very happy on their new homestead: “Mr. Libby spends as much time as he likes reading the Talmud, and Mrs. Libby keeps busy ‘living like in the old country.’ [Papa responds,] ‘I’m glad for them. For years he worked in a shop and they lived in a tenement. With what they have saved and what their children send them, they have no worries.’”⁶⁷ In this case, the Libbys also found a sense of independence through homesteading the land, the independence to be more traditionally Jewish.

One final example of a Jew whose life became transformed by growing to maturity in the western land was Morris Abraham Cohen, who went from being a truant in turn-of-the-century East London to a farm boy in the Wapella community, ending up as the personal bodyguard of Chinese nationalist Dr. Sun Yat-sen. Born in 1889, little Moishe Cohen was an Orthodox child whose earliest memory prophesied the course of his life: at school, he recalled, he was “patted . . . on the head and [given] a needle and thread and told . . . to sew two pieces of cloth together.” He thought this was “a sissy sort of job,” so after three days he led a revolt of boys yelling, “Come to the Russian war boys! Come to the Russian war!” Later, Cohen earned a livelihood as an amateur pugilist. “I was quick on my pins and even then I packed a pretty good punch . . . I liked to fight,” he said. After a brief tenure in a reform school by age ten, his worried parents sent him to a family friend’s ranch near Wapella. In 1905, Cohen arrived at the Port of Montreal with a busted nose, but, he declared, “it’s been busted a lot worse since.” He already possessed a braggadocio born of his experiences on the streets. In Saskatchewan he would embellish his identity with western American touches. He hired on as a farm laborer and met a cowhand named Bobby Clark, who “devoted his spare time to giving [him] a sound grounding [in] . . . dice, cards, and pistols.” Clark told him, “I’ll teach you how to handle a gun. But mind two things; never point a rod at a friend and never pull a rod out unless you mean to use it.” These were words that Morris—no longer Moishe and now adding the moniker “Two-Gun”—took to heart. He defended an elderly Chinese man named Mah Sam during an armed robbery in his

⁶⁶ Blanc, *Wars I Have Seen*, 93–126. Jews came together in Wapella from as far as one hundred miles for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and slept on each others’ floors. Blanc’s neighbors in Mitchell bought their matzos from Denver; in Wapella they made them in a “bee” for the whole community at Ben Barish’s grandfather’s house. Leonoff, *Wapella Farm Settlement*, 3, 12, 16.

⁶⁷ Blanc, *Berchick*, n. pag.

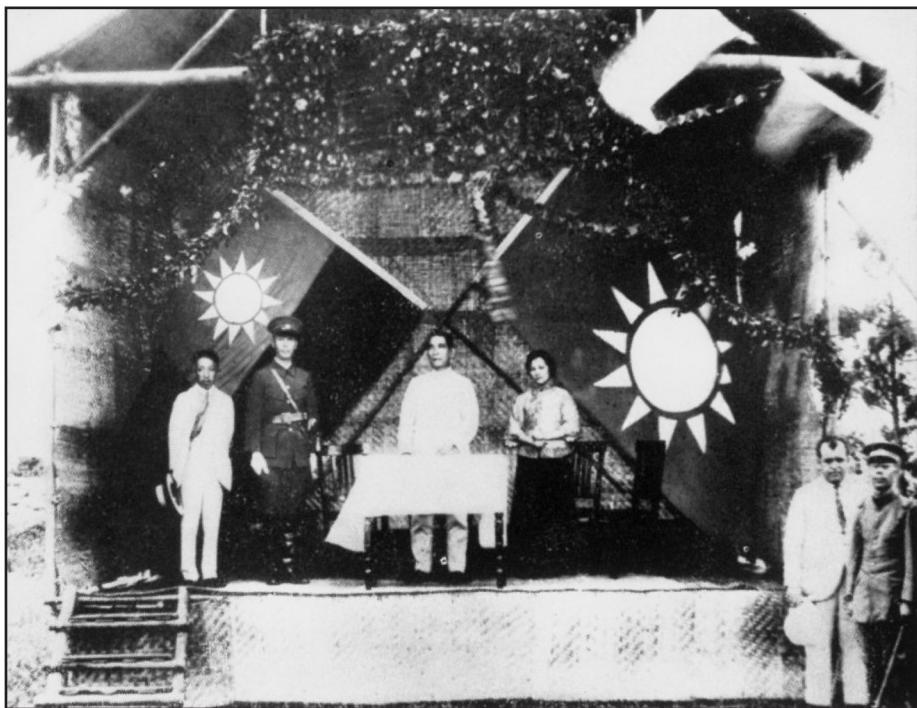


Figure 6. Morris Cohen (second from right) in China circa 1923, with (from left to right) Liao Chung-kai, General Chiang Kai-shek, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, and Mme. Sun. Photo reproduced from Funk & Wagnalls Company, Drage 1954.

restaurant in Saskatoon, which led to Cohen's induction into the underground movement (the Triads) in Canada working to overthrow the Manchu Dynasty. Starting in 1907, and in the employ of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, he bought hundreds of guns and funneled them into the effort to establish a Chinese republic in the years from 1911 to 1949.⁶⁸ He admits in his memoir that he committed heinous acts of violence in the employ of Sun. He showed no remorse for his actions because he had taken on the cloak of the lone gunman-for-hire who decides right from wrong and defends the underdog—in this case, the Chinese. (See Figure 6.) The irony was that as independent as his cowboy persona appeared, Cohen was still very much the middleman, working as the strong arm in another man's revolution.

In comparing these Jews, who found such diverse and rich destinies on the lands of western Canada and the United States, certain continuities emerge. Whether they arrived in North America with a tradition on the land, like the Barishes, or merely saw the land as the key to a better life, like Esther Silverstein Blanc's parents and the

⁶⁸ Drage, *Two-Gun Cohen*, 6, 7, 10, 14–5, 18–22, 27–40 and R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, 1997), 75–169.

Libbys, these Jews desired to live and work on the land and viewed the agrarian life as one that offered security, community, and fulfillment. That in itself is a story forgotten by many historians of the Jewish Diaspora. Even if they had not chosen to go to the land or had no desire to farm, the culture of self-reliance that Jews like Esther Silverstein Blanc and Morris "Two-Gun" Cohen discovered could change their lives forever. Of course, the final continuity was between these diverse Jewish agrarians and Jewish philanthropies—both saw the land as a more stable means of survival. Yet both groups had ideological and cultural reasons for planting Jewish roots in the heartland, reasons that reveal the often startling differences between philanthropic agendas and their objects of reform.

Because Jewish philanthropies saw the wide-open expanse as the means to hide Jews, thereby saving them from persecution, they were always less concerned with preserving Jewish culture than helping Jews to fit in. The nation's anxieties over the loss of the pioneer experience, crystallized by the intense debates precipitated by Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis in 1893, as well as the public outcry over the seeming loss of the single-family farm during the dust bowl era fifty years later, show that Jefferson's vision of the expansive yeoman republic remained the dominant way that many Americans conceived of themselves and their nation. Therefore, it is not clear whether organizations were giving land to Jews and training them to farm in order to stop the spread of anti-Semitic violence—caused in part by Christian perceptions that Jews were parasites because they could not farm—or whether they were reading the cultural winds in North America astutely, winds that equated true Americans with tillers of the soil. In truth, as JAS historian Joseph admitted in 1935, they were "not quite clear what Americanization was or what it involved."⁶⁹ Although the JAS promoted Jewish agriculture in Canada, Argentina, and Australia (as well as the United States), it used the term *Americanization* to encompass all its efforts to place Jews on the land.

By contrast, taking on the mantle of their adopted nations' identities was not the primary goal for Diasporic Jews, although their children often saw their upbringings on the land as making them uniquely American. Rather, they were more often homesick for Russia while they tried to recapture something they felt they had lost—a connection to the land. Indeed, by 1935, organizations like the JAS, after more than fifty years of experimenting with Americanization, finally began to realize, as Joseph put it, the "value of immigrant institutions and the retention . . . of the old world culture." The Diasporic Jews themselves had shown them the value of this "old world culture," like the Wapella farmers who clearly had their own ideas about how best to return to the land. Thus, the JAS started employing Russian Jews whom they felt appreciated their compatriot émigrés but who still understood Jewish "weaknesses," a combination that "proved vital for constructive effort," Joseph concluded.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Joseph, *Baron de Hirsch Fund*, frontispiece.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, viii.

Critics of Jewish agrarian settlement programs like those of the JAS and HEASUSA argued that a return to the land meant that Jews would lose their culture forever. Rabbi I. Harold Scharfman, who has researched the Diaspora in western lands, believed “the majority of [Jews], isolated from their families and communities, with no one to pray with or mate with, intermarried and left no progeny to continue the chain of Judaism that linked them to their glorious heritage” and “simply disappeared into the emerging social order.”⁷¹ The implied utopia to this dystopic vision of Judaism was an insular, self-contained Jewish place where Jews could worship in synagogues, marry other Jews, and have Jewish babies—a place that was “all Jew” like Israel but also, ironically, like the ghetto of Jacob Riis’s Jewtown. Thus, it may be that rather than assimilating, agrarian Jews’ abilities to acculturate on their own terms did not match the expectations of scholars, whose beliefs about racial authenticity may have led them to define assimilation as an all-or-nothing proposition.

The Jews on the prairie problematize these assumptions about assimilation. As the Canadian settlements as well as Jacob Levin’s Jewish enclave in South Haven, Michigan, and Esther Silverstein Blanc’s community in Wyoming attest, building Jewish community was a major goal of rural Jews and perhaps a key factor in making the farming life feasible for some Jews. Far from losing their identities, the farming life gave agrarian Jews security, autonomy, and self-reliance that aided them in continuing their Jewish heritage more on their own terms. The land may have even connected them to the ancient agrarianism of the Torah, stories all Russian Jews would have known. It certainly helped them fit into an Anglo-American culture still largely defined in Jeffersonian terms. Given the opportunity, the security, and the means to form their settlements as they wished, they naturally found their identities as Jewish farmers, an identity that left the Barish brothers, at least, “satisfied that [they had] stayed.”⁷²

⁷¹ I. Harold Sharfman, *Jews on the Frontier* (Chicago, 1977), 280.

⁷² Leonoff, *Wapella Farm Settlement*, 32.